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INDIAN NOTES

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THE ARAWANA, OR FISH DANCE, OF THE CARAJA INDIANS OF MATTO GROSSO, BRAZIL

535 825 [776] Of all the dances of the Caraja, the *Arawana* is the most important. It takes its name from a fish found in the tributaries of the Amazon, particularly the River Araguaya. This fish, the *arawana* or *iraco*, is thought by the natives to be semi-human and is much venerated.

535 [533] The dance, a cross between a turkey-step and a foxtrot, accompanied by weird songs, is performed by two Indian men representing the male and the female fish. Both are dressed alike, except that there is hidden in the headgear of the male representative a cluster of threaded nuts from the palm tree, which rattle as the dancers move.

The dress consists of long slender palm-leaves hanging from the waist to the knees like a skirt. A similar kilt arrangement of leaves covers the body from neck to waist. The head-dress is made from palm-leaves closely braided together in the form of a hood, with coarse grass hanging loose at the bottom, obscuring the face. The upper part tapers almost to a point about two feet above the head and is overlaid with beautiful feather mosaics patterned to suggest the *arawana*. Two "horns" made of grass top the headdress. (Fig. 43.)

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These costumes are made and kept guarded in a wigwam at some distance from the village, and at the conclusion of the festivities are destroyed. Covering the entire body as it does, the masquerade completely conceals the identity of the dancer, who must not under any circumstances reveal his identity to the women onlookers.

Women and children are merely spectators and are never permitted to view the dress except when it encases the form of the dancer. The women of the tribe apparently cherish a profound respect for

FIG. 43.—A personator in the Fish Dance.

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535 this ritual and never seek to penetrate its mysteries.
562 At any rate they seemed to keep at a distance from
[346] the sacred wigwam where the men ate and drank in tribute to the sacred fish.

535 Should a woman, however, so far forget her posi-
562 tion as to enter this mysterious hut or should avail
627 herself of an opportunity to look at this mystery dress, she may be punished by death. Executive clemency is granted by the chief, at the request of the women of the tribe, providing she will promise silence and expiate her crime by some appointed work. If she should refuse, she will be ordered to appear at a designated spot in the woods, at a certain height of the sun, where she will find assembled a group of warriors. Failing to comply with their desires, she may be killed and the body thrown into the river. Should she flee to the [346] sacred wigwam, however, this being sanctuary, she goes free at the termination of the festivities to resume her place in society.

126 Wishing to preserve the costumes as a memento
535 of my visit among them, I asked the chief if I might take them with me. Reluctantly he consented, and ordered his men under cover of darkness to take them in a canoe down the river and await my coming. It was by this means that the costumes ultimately came in possession of the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation.

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In answer to the query of why the Arawana dance was veiled in such secrecy, the chief replied that women are not allowed to know everything, as they talk too much. These Indians believe that the authority and superiority of man must be maintained, and that these festivals impress the woman with her inferiority. 535 562

FRANCIS GOW-SMITH

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[For a description of the special dress used in the Arawana or fish dance, see category 535.]